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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: PRE-ELECTION VISIT TO ABADAN REVEALS LITTLE
CHANGE IN ELECTORAL PROCESS

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a recent trip to Abadan city, just west of Ashgabat, PAO met with local officials to discuss preparations for upcoming parliamentary elections. PAO heard mostly standard Turkmen government replies about aspects of Turkmen elections such as public campaign financing and equal distribution of information about candidates. While discussion of the upcoming Turkmen elections was informal and relatively open, all four interlocutors were visibly excited to chat about the recent election of Barack Obama as the new U.S. President. END SUMMARY.

INPUT FROM ALL FOUR, NOT JUST THE BOSS

13. (SBU) On November 25, PAO visited Abadan's city hall for a meeting with the mayor, the deputy mayor responsible for elections, the local electoral commissioner and one other electoral commission staffer. In contrast to many government meetings, the mayor permitted the lower ranking members of the group to do much of the talking about the election process, particularly the election commissioner. Although all four made sincere efforts to respond and to collaborate on answering questions, there was little variance from official statements on the election process.

BROADER NOMINATION PROCESS

14. (SBU) Led mostly by the election commissioner, the four provided explanations about the selection of the district's two candidates, the public financing of candidates, and the role of the central and local election commissions in publicizing information about each of the district's candidates. After asking how the process differed under the new constitution, PAO was told that the nominating process now permitted the nomination of candidates by either the government or by unions or community groups. The commissioner also noted that in contrast to previous years, voters would need to checkmark their choice on the ballot, rather than cross off the names of all other candidates as in years past. Further questions on what has changed seemed to make the four uncomfortable.

THE MEJLIS SPEAKER'S HOME DISTRICT - OFFICIALLY NO INCUMBENT
ADVANTAGE

15. (SBU) As was noted fairly early in the conversation, Abadan is the home district of Turkmenistan's most famous member of

parliament, Mejlis Speaker Akja Nurberdiyeva. Opposing her is Atamyrat Gurtgulyev, a local educator and administrator. Despite questions from PAO about how the candidates differed and questions as to whether or not Nurberdiyeva had a natural advantage, the four maintained an official impartiality. The four emphasized that it was their duty to prevent either candidate from using their office to promote their candidacies, and that both fully supported the policies of the president and either would make an excellent representative of Abadan. All four seemed to be uncomfortable answering PAO's questions about how the two candidates differ, or how a voter could distinguish between them when their descriptions noted that the two were nearly identical and equally worthy. The only real difference came from the commission staffer who noted that Nurberdiyeva was a woman and would perhaps appeal to women and others interested in diversity. He volunteered that his wife was a likely Nurberdiyeva supporter. None of the officials' comments suggested the possibility of comparisons of their views on issues, or their records of service.

MORE INTEREST IN OBAMA THAN NURBERDIYEVA

16. (SBU) After about an hour of friendly, if limited conversation, PAO asked if any had followed the recent U.S. presidential elections. The mood in the meeting suddenly changed with an elevated level of back and forth discussion reflecting that the four Turkmen officials were well-informed. PAO fielded multiple comments and questions from the four including: "If I were American I'd have voted for Obama," "Who did you vote for?" "Did you think Obama would win before the election?" "Why did the polls start to narrow in the last few days of campaigning?" "What happens to McCain now that he has lost?" "Do wealthy candidates pay for their own campaigns?" "Do candidates carry out charity work that will help them win votes?"

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The discussion enthusiastically continued for another thirty minutes. PAO also distributed some IIP literature on U.S. elections and other American topics which all four found interesting.

POLLING STATIONS NORMAL

17. (SBU) A visit to two local polling stations, almost three weeks before election day, revealed little other than some voting booths being set up. But local poll workers and the Abadan election commissioner emphasized that they would do their best to encourage the voters in their districts to vote.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: According to the remarks of officials in Abadan, little seems to have changed from the way parliamentary candidates were selected in the past, when solely the government made the choice. There were some comments about the new constitution advancing their electoral process to a more democratic future, given that social organizations have a greater role. Whether this will result in real change remains to be seen after the new parliament is seated. The more relaxed discussion with all four government officials present (instead of only talking with the highest-ranking official) and the high interest in American elections signaled a greater openness and an interest in American democracy. END COMMENT.

MILES